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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE. By EDWARD THOMAS. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912.

ONE necessarily feels distrustful twinges in reading a book of criticism so hastily written that it falls short of being grammatical. One may question certain of Arnold's critical verdicts, those upon Shelley in particular; but at least Arnold learned to write English before he wrote. This task Mr. Edward Thomas evidently felt was superfluous. There are many writers who do not know what belongs in a paragraph, but the average writer learns what belongs in a sentence. Mr. Thomas has no prejudices as to the amount of straggling matter to be contained within a period. He is capable of including in one sentence the following conglomerate mass: "The young versifier and lover of poetry was not to be discouraged by a schoolmaster, he was more likely to be impressed by his first meeting with a poet in his early school-days, for though the poet was only Rogers he showed 'gracious and cordial kindness' to the small Etonian." There is no possible relation, even that of contrast, between the schoolmaster who corrected meter and the poet who showed kindness. In like manner Mr. Thomas sets down such a combination as this: "Tennyson did not come to the Isle of Wight until 1853, but Swinburne preferred to think and certainly to write about Northumberland." Why Tennyson's coming in 1853 had anything to do with Swinburne's thinking about Northumberland is unstated. Again, Mr. Thomas writes, "He was to recall how often he had chanted or shouted or otherwise declaimed Hugo's *Gastibelza* on horseback." There is nothing but the small "h" for horseback to save one from fancying the poem entitled "*Gastibelza* on Horseback."

The construction of the book is as loose as the sentence structure, and it is quite evident that in writing of the personal characteristics of his subject the author failed to consult authoritative sources. He repeats Edmund Gosse's statement that Swinburne required almost no sleep, dozing occasionally as he sat upright on the deep sofa of his sitting-room. Mr. Watts-Dunton, however, who lived with Swinburne the last thirty years of his life, totally denies this legend, asserting that the poet habitually slept eight or nine hours every night and always took a nap after his luncheon. This may not seem a very vital matter, except in so far as it might influence young poets to imagine genius independent of rest and as the truth on any and every subject is important *per se*.

In the chapter on the prose works he fails to say one word of Swin-

burne's unsurpassed power of invective and his marvelous command of irony. There are few passages in the history of English prose to compare in delicate and insidious irony with the one in "L'Année Terrible," where Swinburne speaks of the poet who harkens rather to the voice of expediency and interest than to the higher voices: "To the friendly admonition that truth which is overtrue is all but falsehood; that in seeking the ideal you find the visionary and become a dreamer through being too much a thinker; . . . that too much light is as sure to blind you as too much darkness, and, if necessary, you should not open the shutter more than half-way; that war and the scaffold are detestable in theory and practically unserviceable; but the shop must be set up beside the temple, though the money-changers were once on a time driven out of it, for the fault of Jesus was to be something too much of a God; that in all things wisdom is moderation, and from its quiet corner can remark and reprehend the flaws and excesses of the universe; as, for instance, that though the sun be splendid and the spring be sweet, the one has too many beams and the other too many roses. This is the inconvenience of all things of the kind and God is by no means free from exaggeration; to imitate Him is to fall into perfection—a grave risk. What is the use of being inaccessible? Jesus goes too far in declining to take the offer of Beelzebub into consideration. Not that I say He ought to close with it, but it is stupid of God to be rude when the devil is civil; it would have been better to say, 'I'll think it over, my good friend.'"

For three full pages of the *Essays and Studies* Swinburne gives an example of subtle irony on the matter of compromise which is unmatched in the English language.

Mr. Thomas accuses Swinburne of self-contradiction because at different times in his life and under different provocation he points out different sides of the genius of Byron and of Whitman. If it is self-contradiction to say of a man one day that he wears a white shirt and of the same man the next day that he wears black trousers, then Swinburne contradicted himself; otherwise not. For all Whitman's freedom and love of liberty, Swinburne loved and admired him; but when he was proclaimed by the popular voice to be a poet equal to Shelley, then Swinburne pointed out differences and degrees of excellence.

It may seem from this that Mr. Edward Thomas holds no brief for the poet he has chosen to write about, maintaining toward him throughout an attitude of marked moderation. No one reading his book would realize that its subject was undoubtedly one of the two greatest of the later Victorians, and certainly one of the two whose message is authoritative for the present generation. On the other hand, Mr. Thomas seems to have read his poet punctiliously and patiently, if not appreciatively, from end to end. It is not his fault if he did not and could not mark its rare and, in many directions, unexcelled beauties. In speaking of Swinburne's use of echoes, he has to put in the most beautiful ever written; the lines from "Félice,"

"Ah, that such sweet things should be fleet,
Such fleet things sweet."

The book has the merit of being a thorough and patient study of the complete works. Swinburne's exuberant facility with rhyme and rhythms is pointed out, as is his unmatched wealth of diction. A strong plea is

made, however, for greater parsimony in using the materials of poetry, lest the reader's attention should flag. The chief flaw in the book is that a young man unpoetic by nature and unable to write correct sentences is finding fault with a poet who could at any odd moment build a very tower of Babylon out of words, whose ease and facility and wealth were overwhelming to the average mind. The study, therefore, while careful and well intentioned, fails in any wise to lead its readers to one of the greatest minds of our era; and the great book upon the life, the personality, the genius of Swinburne is still unwritten. Who is to write it?

THE LYRIC YEAR. Edited by FERDINAND EARLE. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912.

Advertisement proclaimed somewhat over a year ago that some one wished to invest one thousand dollars in prizes for good verse. All the singers in the land were invited to compete for the three prizes into which the sum was to be divided. The result was that ten thousand poems were sent in by two thousand writers, and these were examined by Mr. Ferdinand Earle, and the one hundred which form the present volume were chosen as the best. Of these one hundred, three were again chosen by the editor and Mr. Edward J. Wheeler and Mr. Stanley Braithwaite to receive the prizes.

It may be gross ignorance to confess that we do not know the qualifications of the first and last judges named here; yet we find many others who do not know the names, and *Who's Who*, that compendium of universal information, fails to enlighten us. Mr. Edward J. Wheeler has for years chosen out the most commonplace and unmusical of verse from the current magazines to reprint in *Current Literature*.

There are two American poets of reputation who are well known as understanding of what materials and in what manner verse should be made. Had either one been on the board of judges, the book must have commanded serious respect. As it is, one simply wonders on what grounds these three men decided that they could give verdict on American poetry. Had Louise Imogen Guiney, poet, critic, artist, and great craftsman, given a verdict we should have taken note; or had Georgiana Goddard King, who gives courses in the technique of verse-making at Bryn Mawr College, been one of the judges, the results would have had significance.

It is noteworthy that the *Lyric Year* contains neither of these pre-eminent names—names that command respect wherever the English tongue is spoken. A poem like Miss Guiney's "The Kings," or a lyric like Miss King's "A man called Dante I have heard," would have shed glamour over the entire volume. As it is, the *Lyric Year* is not a volume upon which to congratulate ourselves. We profoundly trust that it represents neither more nor less than the taste of three men. Most of the material therein is pretty sorry stuff. The editor in the Introduction writes that he "has endeavored to give preference to poems fired with the time spirit . . . rather than to mere technical performance." Probably no greater mistake of judgment could be made in testing poetry, which just in so far as it is poetry throws off the "time spirit" and becomes universal and immortal. By such a rule of measurement as he suggests we should forget Swinburne's "Tristram of Lyonesse" to read the Jubilee